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Sandcastles

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SANDCASTLES

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Just enough sun filtered through the abundant summer leaves of the maple tree to touch the strands of my son's fine, pale gold hair and give the appearance of a halo of light. I stopped my work to look at him through the wide picture window of the living room.

Michael's father had built the sandbox around the gnarled trunk of the old maple, so it needed no gaudy plastic top but was shielded and cooled from the sun's heat by the canopy of dense, green leaves.

The unusual quietness suddenly penetrated my awareness, almost as though it had a sound of its own. I rarely saw Michael alone at the sandbox and realized his friends must have been called away, one at a time, to lunch or naps, leaving him the temporary, undisputed right to the pails, shovels, old bent cooking spoons, and fleet of miniature trucks.

I thought of the camera and quickly dumped my armload of laundry on the chair. Halfway down the hall, I remembered that the roll of film had been completely shot last month at Michael's fourth birthday party and no replacement bought. I knew then that the scene in the yard I could not capture with the camera, (the "moment to share" as the television ads hawked it) was all the more precious because I would have to remember it only by its imprint upon my memory. Realizing this, I hurried back to the window, easing myself down into the worn armchair, quietly and softly as though taking my seat in a theatre where the performance had already begun.

The fierce red dump truck was making frantic, careening trips from the pile of dry sand in one corner of the box to the damp, tilting mound in the center. The sand was dumped, then splashed with water ladled out from the bucket standing on the rim of the box. The painted clown's face on the bucket had almost completely worn away so that the bucket now was decorated with one eye, an absurdly large, red nose, and only the tip of a polka-dotted bow tie.

The damp mound of sand grew; the dump truck scurried back and forth; the old chipped cooking spoon patted and sculpted at the sides of the growing shape. I began to wonder what the mound would become. I knew Michael's imagination could choose beyond the endless sandcastles of my own childhood – firehouse, circus tent, space station? When the two tilted projections on top slightly resembled turrets, and when the cracked, crumbling shape in front of the mound barely resembled a drawbridge, I smiled and felt my throat ache. He stopped several times to change the position of his blue-jeaned legs or to brush the unruly blond locks from his eyes. Once, a raucous jay interrupted him, and he turned from his task and squinted upward at the bird. He listened to all the bird had to say, and when it finally tilted forward on its claws and flew from the tree limb, Michael turned back to the sandcastle.

He started to reach for a small, bright object next to him on the sandbox rail. I recognized it as the toothpick American flag that had decorated his ice cream sundae yesterday at the restaurant. I had not realized that he had saved it. Had he imagined it flying from the turret of a castle even yesterday as he took it from the ice cream? His still-chubby hand froze suddenly, and he rocked back upon his sneakers away from the tiny flag. I didn't understand what had stopped him. I shifted my position slightly in the deep armchair and then saw the butterfly hovering above the flag. The creature bobbed in the air as though it were riding choppy ocean waves. Misjudging its landing, the butterfly descended upon Michael's hand, resting motionless beside the tiny flag. It opened and closed its amber and black wings in slow cadence to some unheard rhythm.

I realized that I was holding my breath and wondered if Michael was holding his, too. How long the butterfly seemed to rest on his small hand! I couldn't believe that this small dynamo of a human being could be still for so long and not frighten the insect away. Michael moved only once, to tilt his head quizzically and gaze closer at the creature. When the butterfly finally decided that neither Michael's hand nor the bright flag was the nectar-ladden blossom it sought, it lifted itself away from his hand, then bobbed and weaved its way toward the flower garden bordering the redwood fence. When the butterfly was gone, Michael's shoulders lifted and squared, and I could tell that he was drawing a deep breath.

The ache in my throat grew and my eyes filled with tears. I knew I would remember that I had, one day when Michael was four, watched him play in his sandbox under the old maple, that a butterfly had rested on his little hand for a very long time, and that he had built a sandcastle with a toothpick flag in its turret. But I knew also that I would not – could not – remember exactly how the sunshine through the maple leaves haloed his hair, or how his brow furrowed when the drawbridge collapsed or, most of all, exactly how his face lit up when at last Michael lifted his head and saw me at the window.